

# EXPANDING ACCESS TO LEARNING: THE ROLE OF VIRTUAL UNIVERSITIES

The sixth in the series of the Pew Symposia of national conversations about learning and technology convened in July 2002 with leaders of state-based virtual university consortia (VUC) and of campus-based online initiatives, of people experienced in both, and of noted thinkers on the topic. The goal was to answer the questions:

What have we learned thus far about the advantages and disadvantages of VUC organizational models?

What business models work best?

What are the political and policy obstacles that must be overcome in order for a virtual university effort to succeed?

Are there potentially more-effective e models in addition to those already in existence? (p.2)

*Expanding Access to Learning* is an analysis of these issues. Beginning with an analysis of the collaborative model, Twigg points out that a watershed moment occurred in 1996 with the establishment of Western Governors University (WGU) with the support of 18 western governors. WGU and the rapid growth of the University of Phoenix, "made every state take a long hard look at the stand-alone model," and decided that a model of collaboration among already existing programs would meet state needs "without competing head-to-head with existing institutions." Yet,

The assumption that a collaborative model will get you where you want to go is totally unsubstantiated. Collaboration is an extremely difficult thing to accomplish in higher education, just as it is in the world of business. Unfortunately, there are precious few examples of success in either, especially in relation to the number of collaborations that have been attempted. A scan of degree programs offered via VUCs reveals that no more than a handful of collaborative programs exist and that those that do have been incredibly time-consuming and slow to develop. As one participant put it, the cultural differences among U.S. institutions are so great that the "friction levels" do not go down very rapidly. (p.7)

Identifying a range of importance in the 12 top drivers across the 14 leading VUCs, Twigg observes: "In the case of VUCs, collaboration seems to be the answer no matter what the problem happens to be." What better models might there be?

"More-focused, more-learner-centered, and more entrepreneurial approaches" that reject the collaborative model describe VUCs that are making more rapid progress in meeting states' needs:

1. Keep your focus on increasing access for new students (rather than on supporting institutions).
2. Find out what students and states need, and create a mechanism to respond (rather than aggregating what institutions have to offer).
3. Leave the resolution of long-standing higher education policy issues to state policy makers (rather than trying to solve them in the VUC).
4. Create a business plan for self-supporting sustainability (rather than relying on state allocations).

5. Use a cost-effective development and delivery model (rather than a bolt-on model).

*Expanding Access to Learning* presents an alternative model (originally developed by Robert Albrecht, George Connick, Robert C. Heterick Jr., and Carol A. Twigg in consultation to the Electronic Campus of Virginia) called Statewide Educational Ventures (SEV). The SEV model emphasizes institutional autonomy rather than collaboration by contracting for and seed-funding the development of full programs for unmet state needs. RFPs would include specific requirements for admissions and liberal transferability of prior credit, plan for effectiveness assessment of the program, cost-effectiveness and future self-sustainability, enrollment flexibility, marketing, student services, and technology (with a bias towards programs that are web-based, asynchronous, and highly interactive). With details about start-up costs, business model structure and staffing, and partners (businesses, local communities, and granting agencies) of SEVs, the model “can aid each state in increasing the capacity of state academic institutions to serve the state's citizens.”

Case studies of VUCs illustrate successes and barriers to success in seven states, and Twigg comments that:

As virtual university consortia (VUCs) have grown, the more successful of them have abandoned the every-faculty-member-for-himself approach in favor of centrally designing courses that are then taught by multiple instructors. Designing online courses via a build-it-once, use-it-often approach dramatically reduces the costs of development for online instruction, especially when the instructors are adjunct faculty.

Four basic design strategies can be used in various combinations:

1. Combine multiple sections of a course into one large section.
2. Emphasize student-to-student interaction and teaming.
3. Automate grading and student feedback whenever possible.
4. Use a differentiated personnel strategy.

Nearly every state has some kind of consortial effort to establish an accessible, affordable system of higher education for its citizens. Like its precedents, *Expanding Access to Learning* is incisive, achieving its mission for the greater good:

Many constituencies bring self-interested agendas to discussions about technology: administrators worry about facing competitors; faculty worry about keeping jobs; and vendors worry about selling particular hardware and software. So too do different segments of the higher education community bring competing agendas that often reflect political considerations first and quality concerns second. The Pew Symposia are intended to produce thoughtful analyses and discussions that serve the larger good. Please let us know whether we have met that goal. (p. 4).

Like the first five influential Pew Symposia reports, *Expanding Access to Learning* is a model of clear-thinking, a generous resource for rebuilding higher education.

**Carol A. Twigg.** *Expanding Access to Learning: The Role of Virtual Universities.* Center for Academic Transformation. <http://www.center.rpi.edu/PewSym/mono6.html>